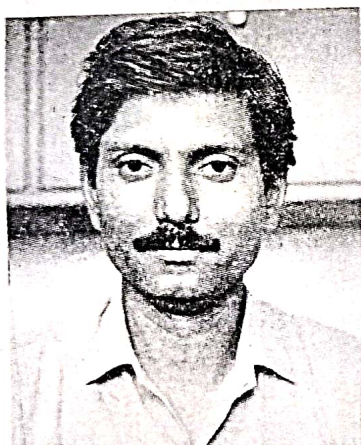


SUDDHASATTWA BASU - A Profile

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"Fame or money has never been a motivation for me. I wanted the quality of my work to speak for itself," says Suddhasattwa Basu, and that is exactly what his illustrations do in Ruskin Bond's 'To

Live in Magic.'

In a book of poems on nature for the young, the illustrations blend superbly with the text to speak volumes. Hence we can feel the 'Flower Power', almost, 'Listen to the Trees', and in 'A view from the Window' we observe the insignificance of man in comparison to awe-inspiring Nature.

Young, unassuming and cheerful, Basu received his diploma from the Government College of Arts and Crafts, Calcutta, in 1978. He came to Delhi in 1981, and after a short stint at the Delhi Press, took up assignments with 'Target', a children's magazine published by Living Media. He worked with them for five years.

"Target was a good experience and I enjoyed working with them," says Basu with sincerity. "The atmosphere was good, I learnt a lot about Applied Arts like designing, type face etc. and the then editor, Ms. Rosalind Wilson, was very helpful. She encouraged and guided me at all stages."

Even now, he enjoys a very good relationship with the *Target* group and occasionally does some work for them. To him, it was a good training ground for practical application of the art that he loves so much. Incidentally, Basu has recently designed the AWIC's (Association of Writers and Illustrators for Children) Illustrators Catalogue.

Basically a student of fine arts, Basu says that "Fine art is the mother of all arts and the rest are only derived from it." Basu has held exhibitions of his paintings in Delhi and Calcutta. He has had his illustrations displayed in Japan and at the Biennale of Illustrations, Bratislava (BIB) at Bratislava, Czechoslovakia, and has had very good response from both places.

Asked about the struggle that preceded his success, Basu is quite emphatic in not having to do so in any real sense of the word. "Perhaps, it was because of so many good people I came in contact with," he says. But the five-year course learning the art form which has helped him carve a niche for himself was the real struggle, he says. He continues to expand on it further. The first three years especially were very rigorous and he had to work very very hard, but from the 4th year onwards a certain amount of freedom in work was allowed.

Living in Chandernagore, near Calcutta with his parents, Basu had to commute daily by train to reach his college at 9.30 a.m. He was in the habit of getting up early in the morning and going out of the house with a pencil and pad.

The Bengal village with its people and lifestyle, the Hoogly (Ganges) river running

nearby, and the bountiful scenic beauty of the surrounding area, gave him ample scope for sketching. In college again it was hard, non-stop work until 4-30 p.m. In the evening, he again went around with an informal group of friends doing sketches, and reached the station to catch the 10.30 p.m. train back home. Therefore, it was sheer work, work and more work all those years.

Basu particularly remembers one incident while he was in college. During the first year, some of the students of his class noticed a few 3rd year students doing some sketches. With wet paper and a splash of china ink they were making the sketches which looked very easy. Some of his friends followed the same method for one of the exams. They were strictly told to never ever use a wet medium for examinations until the 3rd year. Till then, it would only be the hard medium of paper and pencil! Basu attributes this kind of training to the quality of work that is produced by him. Today, he can work with any medium to express his art form.

After leaving *Target*, Basu directed and made the first totally indigenous animation film, 'Gayab Aya', which was well received by children. Basu loves to explore and extend his work to new areas, trying out new mediums. Animation films being a visual art was only an extension of his expression. Even now he has some ideas for more animation films, but there are a few constraints like finance etc.

Though nobody else in his family draws or paints, Basu feels he may have inherited this talent from his maternal grand-mother whom he had never seen. She did decorative paintings on wooden planks (patara) which were used when sitting on the floor. For marriages and festive occasions these were specially painted with such fine lines and designs that she evoked a lot of appreciation. She also painted replica's of postage stamps which were displayed in some exhibitions and won her a

number of medals. People pried them with their finger nails to remove them since they could never believe that they were not real postage stamps! His mother also drew beautiful 'Alpana' with rice paste and Basu used to stand for hours admiring them. Later he tried to make his own designs with the paste. "That may have been my initiation to the arts," he smiles.

Basu admires the works of Ganesh Pyne, Sudhir Pattawardan and Nandalal Bose. He admires Jamini Roy a lot for the way he brought about a total transformation in his art form, from the completely Western form to the equally complete Eastern style during the Bengal Renaissance.

"Sensitivity," asserts Basu, "is the quality that an artist needs most to express his art. Lines, colours etc one can learn about and excel in, too, but to bring life into one's illustrations one should be sensitive to understand and comprehend the text."

Working for 10 hours a day is almost routine for Basu. His spacious studio in Karol Bagh is his workplace. The first book that he illustrated was Margaret Bhatt's 'Travelling Companion' brought out by Thomson Press. He still has a copy of the 'Travelling Companion' though he does not have copies of all the illustrations he has done so far. His favourite book is Ruskin Bond's 'To Live in Magic'. Another one of his favourites is Khushwant Singh's 'Nature Watch'. Here also the fine illustrations and vibrant colours are breathtakingly beautiful, and the cover of the book is unique for its conception and design. Basu also does some work for professional magazines like 'Business Today' etc.

Married to his childhood friend, Basu leads a happy life. His wife supports his total involvement in his work. Without that he could not have achieved this much as his work takes a lot of his time.

Basu has neither any regrets about the choice of his career nor does he have any other interests. The only time he has tension is when he has to keep his deadline with the editors. An artist who is totally committed to his medium, he can get carried away when speaking about his subject. An idealist to the core, he feels that a good artist should never become a rubber stamp. Even while in college, a student should not adhere to a particular style. Mannerisms in the way the medium is used should never be encouraged. Asked to define style, he hesitates for a second and answers, "Style is personality. The illustrations should have the personality of the artist, what he likes... something that gives dimension to his work."

Talking about his lot as an illustrator, he says that he generally received a fair deal from editors and publishers, but then talking about copyright for the illustrator's work he explains, "The illustrators have no means of securing copyright for their works," he pauses, "though it may not be possible to ask for copyright for the illustrations done for regular stories, features etc. Picture Books, Natural History and other such books that have elaborate illustrations must go with a copyright

clause for the illustrator."

Finally, he finds children's book production in India lacking in a number of areas. To name a few, he feels that a lot of improvement can be made in combining the story and illustrations. "Sometimes the illustrations are jarring," he says. The editor should choose an illustrator not just because he is a good artist but keeping in mind his style, which here means his conception and visualisation of the text, complementing it and the suitability of that to a particular book.

Book production can improve tremendously, but he seems to agree with the publishers that there are a lot of constraints.

Printing is fairly good but sometimes the quality can be affected because of the budget and target market. Binding, he feels, is quite bad.

Suddhasattwa Basu has achieved a lot within a short span of time. With his enthusiasm and hard work, he has a right to expect even greater success in the coming years. When Basu takes the brush in his hands, it cannot do aught else but project his sensitive personality, which in turn breathes life and colour into his illustrations.

Whatever I have learnt was what I had taught myself and by practice and more practice.